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THE BISHOP'S VOICE

EVERY clergyman, of every denomination, ought to be compelled to read at least once in every year the brief essay by Elbert Hubbard entitled "The Bishop's Voice". It runs to only four pages, but it manages to say a great deal in that brief space. Two or three sentences, by way of sample, will indicate the tenor of the whole: "Not one clergyman in ten uses his own voice—

he uses only an imitation. He never hears his own voice and so becomes afflicted with the microbe of delusion and imagines someone else's voice is better . . . Very many preachers—especially young preachers—expect to become bishops, and in order to be fully prepared when the call comes, they cultivate a Bishop's Voice".

LIKE BULLS OF BASHAN

AMBITIOUS young clergymen, Elbert Hubbard points out, are easily impressed by the big voices of their official superiors. They imagine that because all bishops are supposed to be powerful and lusty, their voices must shake the rafters of heaven. To become a bishop, the first requisite is obviously to develop a voice like the bulls of Bashan—at any rate, this is one of the characteristics of a bishop that can be acquired by an enterprising and determined curate. Some of the other qualities necessary for high ecclesiastical preferment may not be so easy of attainment, but they can wait. What matters most is to make a start in the direction of episcopal glory; and, if the voice be the voice of a bishop, very likely the rest of the requirements will become attainable in due time.

But this initial excursion into the heights of episcopal splendor is apt to prove costly. Tonsilitis, to begin with, because the cultivation of

the Bishop's Voice involves abuse of the physical organs of speech; then nervous prostration, because "they have ceased to be themselves and are trying to pass for someone else"; and finally a kind of spiritual stultification, which is another name for losing one's own soul, because "men who speak in an unnatural tone express things they do not believe". "You see it is like this—the Universe is not planned for duplicity"; and then the whole business is summed up in nine words: "Beware of the Bishop's Voice—your own is better".

THE NECESSITY OF BEING YOURSELF

THAT'S the real point. "Your own is better". It may not be so magnificent, but it is better just because it is your own, for the very first demand which preaching lays upon anyone who ventures to speak from a pulpit is that he shall be himself. Nothing so quickly raises the suspicion that a preacher is insincere as the use of a voice which is unmistakably not his own, and when once that unhappy idea has entered the mind of his hearers a preacher's usefulness is over. He may utter priceless pearls of wisdom, but they will look like acorns; and—after the habit of speaking in an unnatural voice has become confirmed—they will *be* acorns. The pitiless judgment of a congregation, which is

very often only made evident by absence from the pews, will fall upon any preacher who persists in giving the impression that he is not himself when he enters his pulpit, and that judgment can ultimately destroy the integrity of the preacher's mind and soul. It may seem a trivial matter—this question of a preacher's voice, but it can be fatal to everything he most cares to be and do. The universe is not planned for duplicity, and even the duplicity which arises almost unconsciously in the foolish attempt to make his voice more impressive than was intended by Nature will sooner or later destroy the man who indulges in it.

A GREAT AND STRONG WIND

ANOTHER piece of required annual reading for preachers—if I were allowed to make the selections—would be a chapter in C. E. Montague's "Disenchantment", entitled "The Sheep that were not Fed". It is all about the chaplains with the British Expeditionary Forces, and it isn't pleasant reading, for it stirs all kinds of uncomfortable doubts and suspicions in the heart of any preacher. The particular passage I have in mind runs as follows: "Part of a famous division of Highland infantry were given one day, as a special treat, a harangue by one of the most highly reputed of chaplains.

This spell-binder preached like a tempest—the old war-sermon, all God of Hosts and chariots of wrath and laying His rod on the back of His foes, and other thunderous sounds such as were then reverberating, no doubt, throughout the best churches in Berlin. In the south-western postal district of London, too, his cyclone might have had a distinguished success at the time. As soon as the rumbling died away one of the hard-bitten kilted sergeants leant across to another and quoted dourly: 'A great and strong wind, but the Lorrd was not in the wind'."

That is good doctrine, in these days, for more than preachers. We are once again living in a time when emotions easily get out of hand, and we all need to be reminded that the word of the Lord came in a small, still voice, not in the wind nor in the fire nor in the earthquake. We all need that reminder; but preachers need it more than anyone else, for preachers are expected to keep steadier heads than the rest of the world. The British Tommies, who were entirely willing to indulge in the most terrific language of abuse under provocation, expected something better from the padres. As Montague puts it, "they secretly wanted a change from themselves", and they insisted that the change must be for the better. "Had the parsons really nothing to say of their own about this noisome mess in which the good old world seemed to be foundering?"

That penetrating and disconcerting question will be asked in many forms and under many different circumstances during these days of tragedy on a world-wide scale, and every parson will lose many a night's sleep trying to find an answer that will satisfy himself. Whether his answer will satisfy anyone else is, after all, a secondary matter. To satisfy himself is the first and essential requirement, and that will be exceedingly difficult.

AN EARLIER EXAMPLE

ON the Sunday morning after the fall of Fort Sumter, in the old First Parish in Portland, Maine, Horatio Stebbins preached from a pulpit over which the flag was draped. Some of the people felt that this was an indiscretion, and remonstrated with their minister. More than that, they warned him. His reply was entirely characteristic of the man who was later to be Starr King's successor in San Francisco. "I have great respect for the people, and it gives me pain to come in collision with their convictions; but there is one man whose respect I must have, and his name is Stebbins".

That is the fundamental necessity—the self-respect of the preacher. If, in our Unitarian churches, we can hold fast to that basic idea, we need not worry very much about all the lesser things.

Do you remember the great passage in the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel when the Lord bids the prophet stand upon his feet and hear the word which he is to speak to the people? "Son of man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that hath rebelled against me. . . . And they, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear, yet shall know that there hath been a prophet among them". Are there any nobler words between the covers of the Bible? Are there any more fitting for a minister to hear echoing within his mind and soul when he stands in his pulpit? "Whether they will hear or whether they will forbear". There is a superb independence in the heart of a true preacher—not indifference to what his hearers think, not failure to respect the liberties of the pew, but the independence that comes from self-respect that must be maintained at any cost, the independence that is based upon the sure knowledge that he is under authority and speaks for God.

OURS IS THE OPPORTUNITY ALSO

IT was said of Horatio Stebbins that he was "a tower of strength to the impetuous state". We need such towers of strength in our time, and the secret of their strength is still the same. Only the prophet understands the full meaning of that secret and the price which must be paid by

those who dare to search it out and speak by its power; but there is important service that can be rendered by all the rest of us—men and women in the pews of our churches, on church boards of trustees, in places of denominational leadership. Ours is the opportunity to keep open the channels of free communication, to stand fast by the principles of freedom of thought and of speech, to respect the sovereignty of the individual conscience as the one foundation of free churches, to keep our minds clean of all intolerance and bigotry, and to welcome, with eager sympathy, the fearless word when the prophets among us are compelled, by an inner authority they dare not disobey, to speak.

F. M. E.

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